

Book Notes

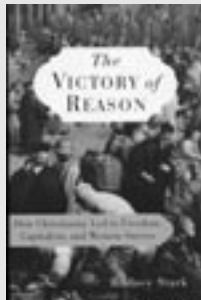


Exploring the Religious Life, by Rodney Stark. (220 pp. ISBN 0-8018-7844-6, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

This is a collection of studies that constitutes a treasure trove of careful, scholarly, often empirical insights into matters often misunderstood by sociologists in general. Studies like this underlie the more general books he has written, such as *For the Glory of God* (Reviewed in IJFM 20:4) and *Victory of Reason* (see below).

The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success, (280 pp. ISBN 0-400-6228-4, New York: Random House, 2005)



—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

This most recent of Stark's books continues the theme that Christianity has been behind the major uniquenesses of Western Civilization.

I can do no better than to snatch a paragraph from the dust jacket:

In *The Victory of Reason*, Rodney Stark advances a revolutionary, controversial, and long overdue idea: that Christianity and its related institutions are, in fact, directly responsible for the most significant intellectual, political, scientific, and economic breakthroughs of the past millennium. In Stark's view, what has propelled the West is not the tension between secular and non-secular society, nor the

pitting of science and the humanities against religious belief. Christian theology, Stark asserts, is the very font of reason: While the world's other belief systems emphasized mystery, obedience and introspection, Christianity alone embraced logic and deductive thinking as the path toward enlightenment, freedom, and progress. That is what made all the difference.

In this book, Stark continues his campaign of indictment against historical studies, sociology in particular, which are bent and driven by anti-Christian assumptions and perspectives. Turning settled theories upside down is his special ability.

Missiologically, it must be plain that if it were true that "Western success depended on overcoming religious barriers to progress" (which in the dust jacket Stark labels "nonsense") our outreach around the world would be confined to rural, unlettered people who had not heard that widely believed distortion. And even then our successes would have to be seen as temporary, just as the massive, amazing Evangelical Awakening in England virtually collapsed in the following century (See IJFM 21:1).

Opus Dei, by John L. Allen, Jr. (403 pp. ISBN 0-385-51449-2, New York: Doubleday, 2005)

—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

This book is the closest thing to an official defense of Opus Dei, written possibly as a response to the novel, *The DaVinci Code* (Reviewed in IJFM 21:2), a novel that was even more critical of Opus Dei than it was of Christianity in general.

Even if it is a conscious response (and it does refer to the *DaVinci* novel from time to time), it seems to be quite objective and is written by one of the most highly respected reporters on Vatican affairs.

The Opus Dei is a lot like the Masons, although it has women members. It seems to be a semi-secret club of devout Catholics who relish the disciplines of Catholic history, including mortification (intentional physical pain).

Its "Centers" around the world parallel to some extent the worldwide branches

of the now declining YMCA. Also parallel would be the global Christian Endeavor movement, and the misnamed Bible Club Movement once so influential in the history of Korea. But these are all in decline.

The Navigators would be another parallel. Once in the Navigators you can become a long-term staff member, but, as with Intervarsity or Campus Crusade, students may mostly go through and out the other side. Only staff members are long-term. Opus Dei seems to be better organized. Recruitment may be mainly student level but for members there is no significant change on graduation in regard to membership in Opus Dei.

In one sense it is "anti-religious" and as such has tried to distinguish itself from the Roman orders. Most of its members are not clergy. While the clergy members perform religious duties, at meetings of the Opus Dei they are treated as equals to the lay members.

Opus Dei has across the years attracted an enormous amount of criticism. This is in part due to its huge behind-the-scenes influence. In general its members are not supposed to be known as members.

Partaking of centuries of Catholic tradition in its incorporation of "mortification" and other things, it has had an uphill battle, understandably, with contemporary cultural expectations. But that's mainly in the USA. Its membership is global.

Its primary focus is the sanctification of daily life, and in that sense it has very little competition from mainstream Christianity, which (as in the *Purpose Driven Life*, Reviewed in IJFM 21:2) has little formal emphasis on what work members do in their 40-hour week. That feature, the sanctification of daily life, is, however, the steel backbone of Opus Dei, and one of the major reasons for its virility, certainly.

What can we learn from Opus Dei? At least the fact that lots of sincere believers do not mind locking themselves into a disciplined life. What can't we learn? On the face of it the mere "sanctification of daily life" does not even hint at the essentially wartime footing of the followers of Jesus Christ, who are intended to be "sent," along with the Son of God, to "destroy the works of the Devil (1 Jn 3:8)." Undoubtedly sanctified intuition has led thousands of Opus Dei people into that war effort even if they have only backed into it. But their basic statements do not acknowledge the strident evil in this fallen world, to which we are to give battle.

Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life, by Laura Nash and Scotty McClennan, (316 pp. ISBN 0-7879-5698-8, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

I am mentioning this 2001 book because it relates to my critique of the Opus Dei. Here is one of the common alarmist or pessimistic statements:

We see many signs of Christian businesspeople from every denomination rejecting their religion, and religion overwhelmingly rejecting religion. (p. 255)

Otherwise this is a thoroughgoing study of the very large picture by a Harvard professor and a Stanford professor, respectively.

From my point of view it never really addresses what I consider the overall "wartime" economy within which the Christian believer must rightly work and with which all human endeavor must be evaluated, but it does describe accurately and extensively the great polarization between the worlds of church and business.

Until there is a clear and widely understood missiology of work, the "spreading of the Gospel" of salvation in eternity will remain both weak and superficial, and the bustling

expansion of business will be ethically and theologically rudderless. Such a missiology, on the one hand, will have to explain how all work can be sanctified and religious if it is making an effective contribution to the breakdown of evil (human, social, natural, pathogenic, etc.) and the restoration of God's glory, and, on the other hand, explain that all religion can itself be sanctified work if it does more than dote on present and future "blessings", ignoring and avoiding the military task to which Christ and His followers are currently assigned.



1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus. Charles C. Mann, (466 pp. New York: Knopf, 2005)

—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

This book is the work of a brilliant and studious journalist. In other words it is both intelligent and very engagingly written. Far more than a travelog (although he has actually "been there" in many cases), it is a collection of different writings over a period of time united in this book by their relevance to the nature of events that occurred in the so-called "New World" before Europeans began to stir things up.

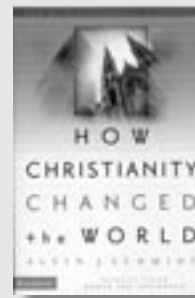
In such matters, what filters down to the popular reader is usually "settled" ideas, which in this man's hands are not settled at all. Mann peels back the veneer of established conclusions to introduce the reader to the all-too-human protagonists in developing interpretations of past history. He gives fascinating insights into the history of interpretation, citing revisions and revisions of revisions.

We hear that the word Aztec is no longer considered useful, that Pre-Columbian cities rivaled European cities in both size and splendor, that the early Clovis theory is no longer as simple a picture as was supposed.

Virtually nothing Pre-Columbian that has been well accepted is now safe from the onslaughts of disagreement by reputable scholars and the battering of new discoveries by an ever increasing number of archeologists and other researchers. Fascination comes from an awareness of the scope of true tensions between different opinions. Mann takes us into the drama of discovery as well.

Mann has the advantage of not being subject to the usual pressures to conformity that swirl and too often control thinking in the world of academia. His journalistic disciplines and skills combined with his determination to get at the bottom of things enable him to present us with a big, detailed book that is a page turner and at the same time full of important new perspectives!

His objective and dispassionate concern not to take sides allows him, in effect, to be witness to the all-too-human dimensions of university thinking, and in this sense puts his book into the same genre as Stark's stark re-evaluation of many different streams of academia.



How Christianity Changed the World, by Alvin J. Schmidt. (442 pp. ISBN 0-310-26449-9, Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2004).

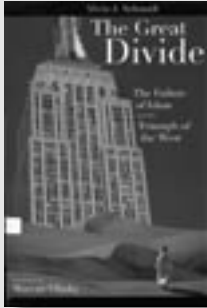
—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

This book is apparently an exact reprint of the same book from 2001, which then had the playful and no doubt undesirable title of *Under the Influence: How Christianity Changed Civilization*. This new printing makes no reference to any changes and the pagination is identical. But it does contain an additional 19 pages of helpful study questions. This would appear to be the only difference.

This is a sturdy, detailed, enormously valuable book bringing to light what is mostly obscured in our highly secularized media and literature today.

It is a bit more direct and popular than are Rodney Stark's more academic books but is a valuable companion. Schmidt does not write quite as defensively as Stark, who at every point is aware of secular opposition to what he says and has to prove his points against an opposing current. Also, Stark does not present a single comprehensive defense of Christianity but is selective and more exhaustive in what he does treat.

The Great Divide: The Failure of Islam and the Triumph of the West, by Alvin J. Schmidt. (332 pp., ISBN 1-928653-19-7, Boston: Regina Orthodox Press, 2004).



—reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

In comparing Christianity and Islam this book understandably carries over a great deal of Schmidt's *How Christianity Changed the World*. But this time it adds a wealth of detailed and fascinating information about Islam.

Unfortunately, its purpose does not seem to be total objectivity. It is making a case—a fairly good case—but a case nevertheless. For example, it faults the Muslims for taking over (in certain areas) the deplorable custom of female genital mutilation. He does not mention the fact that Christian missions even in modern times have made little change in this area. He does not blame Christianity for embracing celibacy. This may be primarily, as with female genital mutilation, due to the pre-existence of celibacy in the territory it overran. He describes the virtual non-stop aggression of the forces of Islam prior to the crusades without mentioning the similar conquests of “Christians” under Charlemagne, for example. He assumes that because the Roman Empire long dominated the Middle East, therefore Christians, in the Crusades, were merely seeking to reconquer lands they had formerly ruled. In this vein he does not mention the understandable claim of Semitic

peoples to regain control of their part of the world.

It is embarrassing that while Muslims at least have it down on paper that they must respect other “people of the book,” and to some extent have done so, the Christians in their most magnanimous moments down through history have had no such formal policy or practice. Furthermore, for 13 centuries the Muslims have been in charge of Jerusalem. During all that time right within the inner wall of the city there are four protected quarters roughly equal in size for Jews, Christians, Armenians, and Muslims. Yet when the Crusaders broke into Jerusalem they killed everyone, even the Christians.

For seven hundred years, by taking over the relatively advanced Mediterranean civilizations, Islam steadily preserved and reflected far more advanced levels in literature, medicine, political science, etc. This fact is what mystifies Muslims today concerning the modern, relatively sudden reversal of their superior relationship to the formerly warlike tribal Christians of middle and northern Europe. Islamic courts, schools, and scholars incorporated both Jewish and Christian intellectuals. There is little of this in Western Christian history.

We read lurid details about customs regarding women which did not originate in Islam but in general reflect the cultural substratum which they inherited by conquest. Similarly regrettable attitudes toward women were inherited by Christianity expanding in Europe—many women in the United States were not allowed to learn to read as late as the 1870s. And when a highly Christianized country like the United States cannot make up its mind about slavery until the end of the Civil War, we easily forget that wife beating has existed far longer in Christian lands than its prohibition.

Schmidt does not simply compare the good points of Christianity with the bad points of Islam but the very title of the book makes things out to be black and white, and some of the book bears out that perspective.

I would like to see someone do as thorough a job of describing the many

magnificent things about Islamic history. As I see it, Islam is best understood as a Semitic rival and parallel to Roman Christianity. With far less contact with the Bible than Christianity, it is nevertheless a significant tradition. Like Mormonism, which has its extra “New Testament” produced by its Joseph Smith (of similarly dubious morality), and while not making a whole lot out of the Christian canon, Islam is evidently a vehicle of incipient faith for millions of non-terrorist Muslims.

If there are 160,000 dangerous “killer” gang members in Los Angeles alone (about half of whom have been through the “born again” process), how many of these “Christian terrorists” are there in the whole United States—and do they kill as many people per year in the USA as do the Al Qaeda youth in the whole world? **IJFM**